

VZCZCXRO0260  
PP RUEHDE  
DE RUEHKU #1934/01 1490834  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 290834Z MAY 06  
FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4724  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001934

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SENSITIVE  
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FOR NEA/ARP, INL/HSTC, AND G/TIP

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: KUWAIT INITIATES AWARENESS CAMPAIGN TARGETING  
EMPLOYERS OF DOMESTIC WORKERS

REF: 05 KUWAIT 263

¶1. (SBU) The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs (MAIA) has initiated the National Project for Domestic Workers (in Arabic it is the National Project for Domestic Worker Awareness-Raising) a project to raise awareness of the rights and responsibilities of domestic employees and their employers. The project is nicknamed "Barirah," the name of the personal servant of the Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha. Saad Ahmad Al-Hajji, the program's director and the director of the MAIA's Family Development Department, told PolOff in a May 24th meeting that the program was conceived in 1997 but has been winding through the bureaucratic process until this year. The project will start with a three-month period of information-gathering through questionnaires and town-hall meetings with sponsors (employers) and domestic laborers about what their needs are. The first town-hall meeting took place on May 15 in the Qadsiyya neighborhood of Kuwait City. It was held in a nursery rather than a mosque, which might have been the obvious place for an MAIA meeting, to signal that the program was designed to serve Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

¶2. (SBU) Al-Hajji noted that Barirah will take a two-pronged approach, targeting the sponsors and the workers. The project will focus its first efforts at educating the sponsors. Barirah will produce brochures and television spots to encourage good treatment of domestic workers, including abiding by Kuwait's new standard employment contract stipulating a weekly day of rest, a minimum monthly salary of 40 Dinars (140 USD), and limited daily working hours. The awareness campaign will have an Islamic bent. (Comment: This is a smart approach since the program should be less likely to be seen as an imposition of Western values. End Comment.) The MAIA exerts significant control over Friday sermons in Kuwaiti mosques and will use this bully pulpit to spread its message.

¶3. (SBU) In its interactions with the press, MAIA representatives have also emphasized the other side of the project: to protect sponsors from their domestic employees. While the sponsor holds most of the power, there have been a number of high-profile cases of household workers poisoning or otherwise maltreating their employers' families. Countless television programs and newspaper articles have been devoted to an impending crisis because Kuwaiti children are being raised by non-Kuwaitis, some of whom are well-qualified and some of whom are not. Al-Hajji told PolOff that Barirah will try to convince sponsors (the majority of whom are Kuwaiti, though tens of thousands of non-Kuwaiti Arabs and others employ household employees as well) that treating their employees well is the best way to insure that household workers propagate good values in their families. Al-Hajji maintains that the current number of domestic workers in Kuwait, approximately 500,000, could be

significantly reduced if the workers were treated better and thus were more enthusiastic about their work. Barirah includes a 24-hour hotline (7722388) for questions. The hotline is not designed to help domestic workers in crisis situations, however, since that is the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior. Poloff called the line, and found it operational. The Barirah staff member said the hotline had been receiving calls already, primarily from domestic employers who had attended the Qadsiyya town-hall meeting.

¶4. (SBU) The second phase of the program -- educating the domestic workers -- is less well-defined. Al-Hajji and Eqbal Othman Mallallah, Supervisor of Women's Activities at Kuwait's Grand Mosque, said they would produce informational materials in multiple languages. They suggested staging recreational events for domestic employees and even providing transportation to these events. (Comment: This is especially important since a common explanation that Kuwaitis give for not permitting domestic workers a day off is to prevent them from getting into trouble outside the house. Newspapers frequently report maids being assaulted while outside the house. End Comment.)

¶5. (SBU) Al-Hajji and Mallallah expressed enthusiasm about FALCon, Post's project to disseminate informational brochures to domestic workers, (reftel), and offered to help in distribution efforts. PolOff offered to arrange a meeting between Al-Hajji, Mallallah, and the representatives of the domestic labor source countries. Al-Hajji and Mallallah welcomed the idea.

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